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Identity Strategy in Postcolonial London

后殖民伦敦的身份策略

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Abstract

Hanif Kureishi is one of the best contemporary English writers. His writing style always changes and post-modernist techniques like parody and mimicry never cease to appear in his writing. On the other hand, his writings have close ties with the context of post-colonialism and imperialism. In his writings, we are aware of his profound contemplation on problems in British society. As his first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* was put to press in 1990. This book was warmly received by the general public and in the literary world for its representation of a half-blood youth's Bildungsroman in London, and in turn won him the Whitbread Prize for Best First Novel that year.

As a postcolonial analysis of this novel, this thesis is designed to explore identity strategy and poetics of black and Asian Britons in postcolonial London. Through the analysis, the author shows that Kureishi, standing in his unique post-colonial position, redefines Englishness and thus enters into the third space.

Here is the structure:

The thesis consists of three parts: introduction, body (three chapters) and conclusion. Chapter One starts with an explanation of third space and cultural hybridity. It is made clear in the first part that within the period of cultural hybridity, entering the third space is the only strategy employed by ethnic minorities in their pursuit of identity. Then it goes with the description of migrants' life in Britain, especially the impact their existence brings on British national identity. At last, Kureishi's postcolonial position is represented by his creative translation of Englishness, which identifies him with other minority writers.

Chapter Two is devoted to representation of London as a postcolonial metropolis. The author believes that in *The Buddha*, London is depicted as a binary city of opposition in structure but lack of mainstream culture in reality. Meanwhile, in London, the postcolonial discourse is subdivided into two different ideologies: assimilationism and essentialism. Conflicting as they are, the essence is the same: ethnic groups are still rendered as the marginal.

Chapter Three concentrates on the narrator Karim's identity issue and expounds Karim's understanding and acceptance of his dual identity. I believe, Karim is the representative of Kureishi in his creation of an in-between identity --- neither British nor Indian. In this sense, he reflects Kureishi's resolution on identity issue of black / Asian Britons --- creative translation of Englishness.

The conclusion generalizes the content and originality of the thesis, Kureishi's particular postcolonial position and its reason, and points out that the identity strategy employed by Kureishi in fact upholds a flexible identity in the context of cultural hybridity.

Keywords: cultural hybridity, Englishness, the third space

摘要

哈尼夫·库雷西 (Hanif Kureishi) 是活跃在九十年代英国文坛的著名作家。他的写作风格丰富多变, 颇具后现代主义的戏仿反讽的味道。但是另一方面, 他的写作并没有脱离后殖民主义和帝国主义的历史语境, 在他的作品中我们能够深刻地感受到他对英国社会的质疑和反思。《郊区佛陀》(The Buddha of Suburbia) 出版于 1990 年, 是库雷西的第一本小说, 内容是关于一个印英混血年轻人在伦敦的成长经历。这部小说获得了当年惠特布雷德小说最佳处女作奖 (*the Whitbread Prize for Best First Novel*)。本文从后殖民主义这一语境出发, 试图探讨小说中黑人/亚裔英国人挣扎求存于后殖民伦敦的政治诗学, 认为古雷希借助其独特的后殖民主义立场, 重新定义了英国属性 (Englishness), 从而走进了非此非彼的第三空间。

本文总体结构分五个部分: 导论, 正文三章以及结论。正文第一章首先阐述了第三空间和文化杂交的意义, 指出这是在后殖民时代少数裔寻找个人属性以及个人身份的必然之路和生存策略。然后简单描述了战后英国移民对英国的影响, 尤其是对英国属性的影响。最后对库雷西定位, 认为他创造性翻译了英国性, 使之具有了不同的起源, 从而走入了非彼非此的境界。

第二章以《郊区佛陀》为例, 再现了伦敦作为一个后殖民都市所存在的种种问题以及少数裔生存所面临的困境。笔者认为 60 年代的伦敦各种文化交杂, 没有真正的主流文化和边缘文化之分。然而另一方面在意识形态上英国本土的后殖民话语分化为本质主义和同化主义, 二者相互纠缠最终突出了黑人/亚裔英国人政治上的边缘地位。

第三章讨论小说主人公卡利姆的身份问题, 阐述了主角卡林阿米尔如何认识并接受其多重身份。笔者认为卡利姆对“英国性”采取了创造性的解释——一种既非英国人也非印度人的身份, 从而解决了身份危机。他这种做法实际上出自于霍米巴巴以及作家库雷西所倡导的第三空间的概念, 而对身份认同的创造性理解也应是生活在后殖民伦敦中少数裔对其身份的理解。

结论部分概括了论文的内容和创新点, 总结了库雷西独特的后殖民地位以及原因, 并指出了卡利姆的身份策略事实上是一种以文化杂交为背景下的身份观。

关键词: 文化杂交; 英国属性; 第三空间

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Introduction

Among contemporary English writers, Hanif Kureishi is an outstanding Indian-British writer, most of whose novels and playwrights bear the imprint of the world-historical events and in whose novels a sense of frustration and mimicry towards “domestic colonialism” (racial inequality in Britain) is hard to miss. Among his novels, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and *The Black Album* (1995) are typical of this kind, and the former one won him the Whitbread Prize for Best First Novel in 1990. Hanif Kureishi is a prolific writer. His other important works includes: *Borderline* (1981), *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1988), *London Kills Me* (1991), *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings* (1996), *My Son the Fanatic* (1997) and *Midnight All Days* (1999), all of which are warmly received by the general public and in the literary world.

Born in 1954, to an English mother and Pakistani father, Kureishi was raised in Bromley, Kent. Owing to his life experience in Bromley, a main suburb of British capital in its South-east, his settings in his novels are largely confined to London and its satellite town and the period depicted in Kureishi’s writing rarely extends further back than the 1960s.

In terms of subject, as a half-blood English, Kureishi inquires into the meanings of “Englishness” and reveals the existing system of “domestic colonialism” (racial inequality) in the contemporary British society. In this respect Kureishi’s novels conform to a tradition of questing the “state of the nation” and the meanings of “Englishness” which dates back well into the nineteenth century.

A most distinctive feature in his writing is his standpoint as the second-generation British Asian. Different from the first immigrant writers, he himself is caught in the British and Asian cultures and suffers from lack of a definite identity. So Kureishi’s work, like Salman Rushdie’s, explores the themes of identity and belonging in multi-cultural Britain. Frederick M. Holmes argues, “Like Rushdie, Kureishi is concerned with the plight of the migrant denied a unitary identity because he is

shunted back and forth between two cultures (each of which is itself internally devised and subdivided) and invited to adopt a variety of sometimes contradictory subject positions” (Holmes 296).

Amongst Kureishi’s major preoccupations, the decolonization for the “native” British population seems to be his top priority. Kureishi believes that British authorities and the “native” British people play a disgraceful role in forming a monolithic British national identity. After analyzing all of Kureishi’s novels, Moore-Gilbert argues that Kureishi has anatomized the contemporary British society into “the quasi-colonial attitudes, institutional structures and social hierarchies which subordinate such minorities” (Moore-Gilbert, “HK” 3). Confronting the dominant value and perspectives, Kureishi’s strategy is to subvert stereotypes of both British and Indian. In his writing, London City becomes a locality of decomposition and the British national identity is redefined and rendered as a hybridized complex of at least two different origins.

My study is an attempt at the understanding of Kureishi’ subversion of stereotypes and his upheld survival strategy in London through an analysis of the postcolonial London City and immigrants’ life in *The Buddha*. By adopting the postcolonial technique which combines the study of the primary works with the background of British society since 1945, my thesis explores the harsh racial discrimination in Britain and tries to position Kureishi as one of minority writers who stand in a junction of past and present, west and east, an “in-between” status.

With a textual-analysis method, my study analyses the metropolis of London in *The Buddha*. I believe London becomes a postcolonial binary city of opposition---in geographical, cultural and political terms. The geographical division sets periphery and center. But due to cultural hybridity and diversity, the influence of globalization, London is scattered with fragmented cultures, in which sub- and co-cultures become such important ingredients of mainstream culture that reaching the center of mainstream culture relies on the manipulation of non-centre things. However, politically, the histories of colonialism occur with the racism of the host society. In the postcolonial period, the master-slave discourse evolves into a relational cognitive

understanding of self and other. Assimilationism and essentialism are typical in this kind, with which immigrants' position is further pushed to a predefined political peripheral. By contrast, the first-generation migrants live in perpetual fear of losing his origin. They either hide or stubbornly cling to their origin, both of which lead to their "eccentric" behaviors in society and become a further justification of "correct" British identity.

Furthermore, with a post-colonial analysis, the thesis represents the hero Karim's hybrid performativity in the novel. Among the second-generation Asian Britons, Karim becomes extremely interesting in his exercise of playing-not-self strategy and mimic actions. The author believes, Karim's performativity accords with Homi Bhabha's "the third space" theory, which provides a negotiation pad with the dominant discourse. And his playing-not self strategy is a creative translation of identity, which, by focusing on fluidity, avoids the tragic ending of the first-generation migrant.

So there are two parts in this thesis: first, the features of postcolonial London will be defined, and then the way in which Kureishi subverts and redefines the English identity will be interpreted. From them, the thesis wants to show us that there is no coherent identity in the complexities of the postcolonial culture and a flexible and fluid identity should be created in the context of cultural hybridity.

Chapter One Postcolonialism and Kureishi's Postcolonial Position

1.1 Postcolonialism

1.1.1 Origin and Development

From poststructuralism to postmodernism, we are hastily entering into a new era of “post-” without a pause for reflection on “post”. Technically speaking, “post” is no more than a concept of sequentiality, either “after” or “ante”. However, it is too simple to be explained in that way. With those “post” added to many familiar terms, scholars intended to break fetters of past thoughts, to create a discourse to “go beyond”. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha regards “post” as a route of “transforming the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment” (Homi 4). So it is with the “post” in the term, “postcolonialism”. According to Bhabha’s explanation, postcolonialism means “going beyond” or “exceeding the barrier” of the colonial period, thus different from “colonial” or “neo-colonial”. After World War II, the former empires gradually lost control of their former colonies and their direct military and political oppression was no longer feasible. Instead, a more hideous imperial conduct works its way through education and culture in influencing upper and middle class children in schools of subaltern countries where cultures and languages of former suzerain countries were taught.

On the one hand, the previous colonial control turned into various neocolonial strategies; on the other hand, the national independence movements after their success were replaced by the criticism of some intellectuals from former colonies, who established their own critical discourse by questioning, criticizing and deconstructing the colonial discourse. In their literary critical practices, they constructed their own theoretical discourse by means of expressing the relationship between the West and the East and disclosing the former colonizers’ ideological control. Postcolonial study

as a literary critical school appeared under such a situation.

Western scholars hold different views towards the origin of postcolonial theory. Bart Moore-Gilbert and Peter Childs confirm the originality of Said, Bhabha and Spivak while Robert Young claims three historical sources of post-colonialism. In China, Wang Ning summarizes the background of postcolonial study as follows: “it is inspired by the decline of the West and asserted by Oswald Spengler; it is a kind of deconstruction within the West but borrows the deconstructionist reading strategy of Derrida, rereads and reevaluates some literary works about colonies” (Wang Ning 80). He also points out that Bakhtin’s poetics of dialogue assists postcolonial scholars to “uttering the voices of discord within the first world, playing the role of minority in a multicultural context” and that under the guidance of Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony and Michael Foucault’s theory of discourse and power, the postcolonial scholars criticize “the cultural hegemony of the west” (Wang 80). In others’ opinion, postcolonialism is considered as a variation of postmodernism, which questions modernity and grand narrative after enlightenment, in the East and the Third World.

Generally speaking, postcolonial literary criticism sprang up with Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), a classical book in postcolonialism. In the book, Said introduces French literary criticism and opens a new discourse under the influence of Foucault, by viewing European literature and culture as a relation of production and power. Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* demonstrates the universal relationship between modern suzerain and its oversea territory, expanding his research in *Orientalism*, from Middle East to Africa, India, Far East and Carabia. From then on, the first generation’s poetics of resistance had gradually moved to negotiation and dialogue of the second generation. Another important figure is Homi Bhabha. Under the influence of Fanon, he focuses on the cultural interactions. A series of key categories in the post-colonial texts such as “the third space” and “hybridity” are closely related.

1.1.2 The Third Space and Hybridity

“The third space” is the “in-between” space just like the stairwell between upper and lower areas. In Bhabha’s opinion, “the hither and thither of the stairwell, the

temporal movement and passage that it allows prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities". In other words, "the third space" goes beyond binary opposition. It is an interstitial space between fixed identifications that "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 4).

The concept of "the third space" is actually a breakthrough to postcolonial theorists. Before its birth, Du bois, a brilliant historian and sociologist, put forward the concept of "double-consciousness" in describing the socio-psychological experience of black Americans:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness... two souls, thoughts, two reconciled strivings... (Bell 12)

This double-consciousness, as we have seen, is one split and isolated mind and the two conflicting consciousnesses have no junction. Therefore, the minorities have inevitably to meet their doom in the course of this ever-lasting dialectical procedure, which constitutes the early stage of postcolonial studies. Fanon, for instance, is desperate in accepting his pre-given identity, but he never feels all right to be an outsider in his society. This clean-cut is dangerous, because by ignoring certain possible negotiations in-between two opposite thoughts, it invites only racial violence and self-destruction.

As the "in-between" space, "the third space", on the contrary, sets a neutral zone for the binary opposition. To some extent, Bhabha supposes that hybridity crosses the boundaries between races, nations and even spatial distance as a mixture without center.

The word "hybridity" is originally a biological term. In biological sense, hybridity means mixture of different species. As early as the 19th century, hybridity

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